JET EXCHANGES

Parental involvement for school improvement: A South African perspective

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Introduction

This paper gives a brief introduction and background to parental and caregiver[2] involvement in schools, particularly in rural schools in South Africa, through reviewing some of the literature on the subject. It also presents some suggestions on what can be done to improve parental involvement in rural schools. The intention of this paper is to stimulate discussion on this important aspect of school improvement.

Education systems worldwide have reformed as policy-makers, administrators and other relevant educational stakeholders continuously search for ways to enhance the quality of education with better learning and teaching experiences (Amoateng, Richter, Makiwane & Rama, 2004). Parental participation or involvement is seen as an effective tool in improving learners' educational outcomes (Mncube, 2009). In South Africa, however, research shows that while parental involvement does occur, it is significantly lacking in schools in rural areas (Sedibe, 2012). Parental involvement in rural schools in South Africa is viewed with mixed feelings (Munje & Mncube, 2018). Among interested and affected stakeholders, ranging from community members, parents and caregivers to the learners in the classrooms, some feel it is a waste of time and that educational issues are the prerogative of the teachers, while others feel it is their democratic right to know what is happening in the school environment (Matshe, 2014).

In this paper, we explore the following questions:

1. What is the definition of parental involvement and the role and function of parents in education?
2. What are the benefits of parental involvement for learners, families, teachers, schools and society?
3. What does parental involvement look like in rural communities?
4. What barriers hindering parental involvement in education have been identified?
5. What are the pathways to implementing effective parental involvement programmes in rural communities in South Africa?

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What does parental involvement mean?

Every parent, regardless of socio-economic status, wants their children to be successful and enjoy better lives (Amoateng et al, 2004, Amposah et al, 2018), and Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that the relationship and interaction between the child and his/her parents are important factors in a child's development outcomes.

Parental involvement is a very broad and inclusive concept that recognises the variety of ways parents can participate in and support their child's development and learning at home and at school and through communication between the home and school (Fantuzzo, Tighe & Childs, 2000). Since parenting roles and responsibilities are unique to every culture, there are numerous definitions of parental involvement (Zickler-Bandlow, 2009). One definition is "parents' active and meaningful engagement in activities and behaviours at home and at school to benefit their child's learning and development" (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000).

Makgopa and Mokhele (2013) assert that researchers also view parental involvement in different ways and agree with Bokhorst-Heng (2008) that "parental involvement comes in various forms and will differ as a child moves through primary and secondary school" (Makgopa and Mokhele, 2013, 219). Referring to Epstein's "classic six-type model" (cited in Bower and Griffin, 2011, 78), Makgopa and Mokhele (2013, 219) describe parental involvement as:

> *(1) the basic obligations of parents as care-providers; (2) schools communicating with parents about school programmes; (3) parents volunteering at school; (4) parental involvement in home learning; (5) the parent as decision-maker; and (6) parental involvement as community collaboration*.

Sayed and Carrim (1998), (cited in Matshe, 2014, 94), identify four types of parental involvement in schools in South Africa:

- Community participation that points to common and shared aspects of human interaction.
- Participation as partners, which implies that legal partners obtain the right to participate in educational processes.
- Regulated participation, according to which constraints are placed on the nature of participation.
- Weighted participation, according to which certain groups of participants have more rights than others, for example, parental representatives which, in the present situation in South African Schools would constitute the majority in SGBs.

Inherent in both these models is a "two-way partnership in which schools support parents and parents support schools towards reaching the common goal of improved student learning" (Makgopa & Mokhele, 2013, 219).

Coleman and McNeese (2009) see parental involvement as encompassing the role of parents in their children's education, the relationship between home and school, and collaboration and partnership between parents and teachers to facilitate the development of the learner, both academically and socially. According to Christenson and Sheridan (2001), the main purpose of family involvement programmes is to support the engagement of families through different methods for increasing the interactions among parents and school members so that parents participate actively in education. Parental involvement programmes promote partnerships between parents and schools and involve collaboration and cooperation between individuals across home and school settings and define the roles and shared responsibilities. Squelch and Lemmer (1994, cited in Matshe 2014, 94) see parental involvement as "the active and willing participation of parents in a wide range of school-based and home-based activities, which may be educational or non-educational".

The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 and its amendments include legislation on the concept of parental involvement in education, highlighting that parents have an important role to play in their children's educational experiences. Additionally, the Act regards parents as legitimate participants in the School Governing Bodies (SGBs) that are required to assist the principal in school management. Thus, parents are expected to participate in their children's education and, as asserted by Singh, Mbokodi & Msila (2004), are encouraged "to play a monitoring role on a number of issues including: ensuring that educational outcomes are of the highest standards"; actively supporting the promotion of the culture of learning; and assisting schools in maintaining a positive learning environment (Singh et al, 2004, 303). Singh et al. (2004, 301) further assert that "parents need to be involved in their children's education and this involvement must include insight into their children's progress, participation in decision making and being critical of information on educational issues".

In terms of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory, children develop within multiple contexts, from the home system to the school system, and then to the most expansive system which includes society and culture. Each system interacts with and influences the other in all aspects of a child's life, and development is optimal if connection and continuation among these systems are well created (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Additionally, this model shows that while family and school are separate environments, when they come together, they have a greater potential to support children's learning and development. Research within the South African context has revealed that both the school and home environments play important roles in learners' achievement (Juan & Visser, 2017). With particular reference to mathematics performance, Visser, Juan and Feza (2015) found that "it is not only the socio-economic factors of schools that impact learners' mathematics performance, but also that higher levels of parental education have a significant positive influence" (Visser et al., 2015, 1).

What are the benefits of parental involvement?

Parental involvement in education is related to many positive outcomes in cognitive and socio-emotional development, increased learner achievement and academic performance, stronger self-regulatory skills, fewer discipline problems, positive learner behaviour and attitudes, improved work orientation, and higher educational aspirations (Amponsah, et al, 2018; Fantuzzo et al., 2000). Parental support and encouragement are recognised as playing an important role in academic achievement (Eamon, 2005). A meta-analysis conducted by Wilder (2014) in the United States found a consistently positive relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement, regardless of how parental involvement was defined or measured (Wilder, 2014: 377). A 2019 meta-analysis of parental involvement in East Asian countries (Kim, 2019), which characteristically have high levels of academic achievement, confirmed this relationship (Kim, 2019: 312). For learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, parental involvement has been found to decrease the rates of grade retention, dropout and referral to special education (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999). Furthermore, research has shown that academically successful learners tend to receive consistent positive support from their parents and other family members (see Ehren & Baxter 2021). In the foundational area of reading development, in a study conducted in 2014, Van Staden and Bosker found that parents introducing early literacy activities from an early age improved children's reading motivation and laid the foundations for reading literacy by school-going age.

Effective parental involvement also provides benefits for school management and teachers in the form of support, appreciation, awareness and an understanding of what is needed to improve teaching and learning. In their study on teachers' perceptions of parental involvement, Makgopa & Mokhele (2013) found that "collaborative engagement" between parents and teachers is essential to enhance learning (Makgopa & Mokhele, 2013). The teachers who participated in the study confirmed that parents' assistance is important in enabling them to teach effectively. It was also found that "the parents themselves are keen to help, since it is the future of their children which is at stake" (Makgopa & Mokhele, 2013, 219). In spite of this, communication between teachers and parents was not always good, resulting in teachers and parents blaming each other when learners did not perform well (Makgopa & Mokhele, 2013, 219).

When there are strong relationships and effective communication between the school and parents, the school will have a better understanding of learners' home environments, family structures and dynamics and out of school activities (Nketane, 2018). Equally, the parents will develop an appreciation of what they can do to support the school management in terms of reinforcing school

attendance and discipline and monitoring learners' work. DePlanty, Coulter-Kern and Duchane (2007), cited in Makgopa & Mokhele (2013), point out that research has found that "parent-child discussions about school help to improve academic achievement and reduce problematic behaviour" (Makgopa & Mokhele, 2013, 221). As Makgopa & Mokhele (2013, 221) assert, "this finding strongly suggests that parental involvement is a valuable component of any learner's education" and can play a role in supporting schools when dealing with discipline and behavioural problems. DePlanty et al. (2007, 361) agree that "parents are their children's first and most important teachers, and for the learners to succeed in school, parents must participate actively in their children's academic lives".

Hornby (2000, 1-2) lists multiple benefits of parental involvement including: good relations between the school and parents; positive parental attitudes towards teachers and the school; improved learner performance in adaptive and social skills; an improved school climate; increased parental satisfaction with the school; and overall school improvement. Additionally, as Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) point out, the benefits of the home-school relationship can extend to the integration of families into the social life of the community and democratic parent-school partnerships and practices based on increased parental knowledge of the operation of the school. Parents can acquire a better understanding of educational matters (Nketane, 2018), become more active in community affairs and develop increased self-confidence (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

In the South African context, research shows that the overriding benefit of parental involvement, including in schools in disadvantaged communities, is that parental support for teaching and learning can indirectly improve learner results (Juan & Visser, 2017; Mbokodi & Singh, 2011; Sedibe, 2012; Singh et al., 2004, Van Staden & Bosker, 2014). And conversely, parents playing "little or no role in their children's homework and study programmes contributed to the poor performance of their children in the classroom" (Singh et al., 2004, 301). Singh et al. further emphasise that community input is important in curriculum development in schools and is particularly important in the case of learners from disadvantaged communities (Singh et al., 2004, 301).

It has also been found that when teachers make parental involvement part of their regular teaching practice, parents increase their interaction with learners at home. Similarly, parent networks at the school level create opportunities for discussion about school work with learners and help parents and schools provide appropriate advice and support to one another as closer relationships are established (Pena, 2000). Increased interaction with their children about education makes parents feel positive about their own abilities to care for their children (Zickler-Bandlow, 2009); they develop an appreciation of the importance of their roles and may be motivated to continue with their own education and strengthen their social networks and contact with other parents to share information and materials.

Parental involvement in rural communities

Providing quality education in rural areas in South Africa is especially challenging (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019), and thus parental involvement becomes especially important. However, rural schools are generally geographically isolated and face challenges such as a lack of qualified and competent teachers, inadequate resources and poor facilities (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019), all of which have a negative impact on building partnerships and collaboration between families and schools (Pena, 2000). Rural communities are often characterised by poverty, economic and political disempowerment, lack of facilities, and high unemployment rates (Biyase & Zwane, 2018). Research indicates that while most parents care about the education of their children, irrespective of their backgrounds, there are unique conditions that influence family-school partnerships in rural settings (Cilliers & Bloch, 2018; Sanders & Epstein, 2005). According to Ndlazi (1999), rural parents described the reasons for their lack of involvement as: lack of finance, work commitments, illiteracy, broken family structures and not seeing value in education. Matshe (2014) points out that parents' lack of interest is a hindrance to the "basic functionality" of rural schools. When parents do engage with schools, it is not to offer their support but to raise concerns about learners' discipline or results.

In rural communities, few parents know what schools expect of them and why their contributions are important, and this is seen as a significant reason for the low level of parent involvement (Makgope & Mokhele, 2013). Ndlazi (1999) argues that in South Africa, the reticence of parents to participate in educational issues can be traced to the discriminatory legislation of the apartheid government.

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Since 1994 attempts have been made to encourage parental involvement, but persistent socio-economic challenges in rural communities have not made it easy. Rivera (2010, cited in Makgope & Mokhele, 2013, 220) found that parents in disadvantaged communities who themselves may have had negative school experiences were likely to feel overwhelmed and/or intimidated by the idea of being involved in their children's schooling.

Rural communities are also characterised by high levels of illiteracy. An example cited by Makunga et al, 2017, is Coffee Bay in the King Sabatha Dalindyebo local municipality. An area of 3 028 square kilometres, the population numbered 451 710 in 2011 and had 95 382 individual households. Of the total population, 57.8% were regarded as illiterate (Statistics South Africa, 2014, cited in Makunga et al, 2017, 2-3). A recent fact-sheet published by the Department of Higher Education and Training (Khuluvhe, 2021) highlights that the illiteracy rate in South Africa is 12%, but is highest amongst 60-64-year-olds (31.1%), followed by 55-59-year-olds (25.8%), while that among young adults is generally less than 6%. Matshe (2014), reporting on the challenges of parental involvement in rural public schools in the North West Province, draws attention to the concept of "functional illiteracy" (Makunga, 2017), which has significance for parental involvement. According to Mantshe (2014), "A functionally illiterate parent is an adult who does not have adequate reading skills to fill out a job application, read a food label, or read a story to a child. These individuals often lack the literacy skills needed to find and keep a decent job" (Mantshe, 2014, 100). The 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) study found that 78% of South African pupils at the Grade 4 level could not read for basic meaning in any national language (Howie et al, 2017). If such a large proportion of Grade 4 learners in South Africa are functionally illiterate, it can be presumed that in a country where 25% of the population has no formal education, rising to 40% in the Black population, with only 16% of those able to read without difficulty (Rosenberg et al, 2020), a large percentage of parents in rural communities find it difficult to support their children's educational development.

Barriers to parental involvement

Hornby and Laefale (2011) identified four levels at which barriers to parental involvement may arise: parent and family; child; parent-teacher; and societal. Researchers such as Pena (2000) and Christenson and Sheridan (2001) found that the educational level of parents and living conditions, amongst others, have a strong impact on parental involvement in education. In South Africa, Heystek & Louw (1999) identified factors such as the time factor, lack of skills, poor communication channels, vast distances to travel to find employment resulting in long working hours, limited skills because of low literacy levels, negative attitudes towards school activities and other socio-economic problems as some of the main challenges faced by large numbers of rural parents in South Africa that inhibit parental involvement. Another factor that needs to be considered when trying to understand the low level of parental involvement is the issue of absentee parents who leave their children in the care of grandparents as they move to the urban areas seeking employment. The grandparents, who do not receive financial remittances, tend to find it more difficult to feed and care for the children (Lu and Treiman, 2007), let alone engage the schools in order to support the children's educational development.

Singh, Mbokodi and Msila (2004), reporting on a study on black parental involvement in historically disadvantaged schools, found that many parents interviewed did not have the knowledge required to help their children with their education, and 70% of the children in the study were in home environments in which they were not motivated to learn. When the researchers visited homes, they identified that learners were expected to do many chores, which distracted them from their schoolwork and tired them out so that they could not pay attention to their homework. In addition, homes were often found to be overcrowded, and the number of family members occupying the house made it impossible for the learners to do schoolwork in their homes (Singh, Mbokodi & Msila, 2004). Equally, Singh, Mbokodi and Msila found that many parents did not seem to understand that they had a role to play in their children's education, and 90% of parents

in their study regarded the schools as being competent to and responsible for dealing with their children without input from parents. On the other hand, looking at the role of teachers in parental involvement, Chen, Kyle & McIntyre (2008, 13) note that "Not knowing how to involve parents or having sufficient time seemed to be major constraints the teachers identified in expanding or making changes in their parent involvement strategies".

Literacy is seen as an important indicator of educational attainment. As discussed above, the literacy rate is low in rural communities, and research has indicated that illiteracy is one of the major factors that militates against meaningful involvement by parents in schools. As Matshe (2014) points out, a parent who is illiterate "cannot assist his or her child with anything that requires reading and writing" and, moreover, cannot participate effectively in school governing bodies (Matshe, 2014, 100). Essentially, parents who are not literate are unable to read notices sent out requesting them to attend school events.

A related consideration is that in South Africa, with its 11 official languages, the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) in the school frequently differs from the language spoken in the home (Howie, 2003). Researchers such as Howie (2003) and Mullis, Martin, Foy and Aroroa (2012) acknowledge that school achievement is greatly influenced by language mastery, and this includes mastery of home language as well as the language of instruction. In South Africa, parents and learners have to contend with the fact that between Grade 1 – 3 learners are taught in their home language, but from Grade 4 the language of instruction is English. According to the Children's Institute, 70% of children learn in an African language in Grades R to 3, then switch to English, with 90% of Grade 4s taught in English (Delany, Jehoma & Lake, 2016). This situation may contribute to the fact that in spite of South Africa's total literacy rate being around 94.37% in 2015 (Statista, 2019), the achievement of Grade 4 learners in PIRLS saw South Africa being ranked last out of 50 countries that participated in the assessment (Howie et al, 2017). The use of different languages as home language and as the LOLT means that parents, particularly those with low levels of literacy, feel they are not able to assist their children with their schoolwork or to improve their literacy and reading skills.

Communication between school management, teachers and parents is vital to foster parental involvement and build the essential two-way trust relationship between schools and parents.
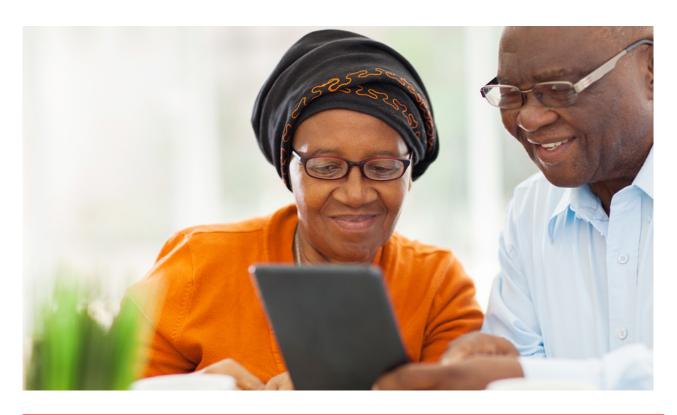
Pathways to effective parental involvement

To overcome some of these barriers, Mbokodi and Singh (2011, 46) assert that "educational managers and teachers need to initiate the participation and involvement of parents in school activities as active involvement will not happen by itself, by accident, naturally or easily or even by invitation". Improving parental involvement requires planning and leadership, but as Makgopa and Mokhele (2013) assert, research is needed to determine what types of parental involvement are the most effective. Consideration must also be given to teachers' attitudes toward parental involvement. Researchers such as Addi-Raccah and Ainhoren (2009), Baeck (2010) and Hornby and Lafaele (2011) have found that while teachers value interaction with parents, they may also "try to limit parents' influence" (Baeck, 2010, 323) if they feel that their professionalism is threatened. Teachers need to be assisted to overcome this barrier and one of the ways is to adopt a collaborative school governance model that empowers both teachers and parents (Addi-Raccah & Ainhoren, 2009, 810).

It has been recognised that parental involvement can involve a wide variety of activities on the part of parents including: attending school functions; becoming better teachers of their own children; serving on a school's governance structures and making decisions in the interest of their children's education (Dekker & Lemmer, 1993). Irrespective of the activity, parental involvement requires the commitment of parents "to work with teachers in the governing structures of schools in the determination of school policy and vision, managing the resources and budgets and selecting staff" (Matshe, 2014, 94).

Communication between school management, teachers and parents is vital to foster parental involvement and build the essential two-way trust relationship between schools and parents. Recent research on accountability in education found that sound trust and accountability relationships between teachers, the school governing body and parents strengthen parental engagement (Ehren, Paterson & Baxter, 2021). However, in South Africa, it was found that communication between home and school was a one-way process, from the schools to the homes, usually through written communication such as letters and notices, and seldom the other way round (Mbokodi & Singh, 2011). This might give rise to the perception that while teachers are keen to communicate with the parents, the same cannot be said of the parents regarding teachers. The case may be, though, that written communication is not the most effective way of communicating with parents in rural communities, where parents may rely on their children to read the letters and notices for them (Mbokodi & Singh, 2011). Other ways of communicating need to be investigated.

The social and educational atmosphere of the schools which facilitates or constrains certain behaviours is an important factor in partnerships between parents and schools. Positive attitudes towards parents and a welcoming school culture are essential to promote parental participation. Parents are more likely to engage when they feel welcomed by the school, when they understand the significance of their engagement, and when they feel capable of making a contribution (Zickler-Bandlow, 2009).

Suggestions from the field

Based on our work over many years in large-scale school improvement projects in rural communities, JET has been working on parental involvement in the context of the school as an ecosystem. This offers an alternative to the traditional approach to parent/school engagement to mitigate some of the hindrances to parental involvement discussed above. We present some examples to illustrate this approach below, acknowledging that this in itself will be something for further research and development.

Traditional parental involvement initiatives focus on support for the academic performance of learners. However, in order to achieve academically, learners need an environment in which they can develop holistically, and this includes socially as well as academically. Parents' support is needed to assist schools to develop learners' sense of purpose, confidence and leadership skills. Seen in this light, parental involvement can be seen as the creation of a coordinated partnership amongst the key stakeholders, namely, the school (management and teachers), parents, learners and the wider community, in order to provide an environment in which all learners can thrive. This approach also offers the opportunity for the school to be seen as an ecosystem or hub, a place which not only educates the children of the community but that, if supported by parents and other community members, can be of benefit to all. The concept of the school as an ecosystem emphasises that if parents are given an incentive beyond just supporting their children in a conventional way, they are more likely to engage with the school and their children's education.

To encourage this type of parental and community involvement, a more dynamic approach needs to be adopted. We need to look beyond parent involvement as simply supporting and upholding the school ethos and supervising children's homework to something that offers parents the opportunity for their own personal skills development (and the chance to improve their lives) via the training, knowledge and experience they acquire through engaging with programmes that are set up at the schools. A combination of activities needs to be developed that cater for a diverse range of parents with different interests, and that could lead to the cultivation of networks of support within families and communities for sustained change. Parents and other community members should thus be offered a wide range of school-based and home-based activities, which may be educational or non-educational, that can contribute to making the school the focus of the community.

Table 1: Examples of possible activities

Parent and community engagement	Development of skills for community	Social and economic development	Support the school campaign
• Food gardens (Skills, build a sustainable network of local food production owned by the community) • Early years resource development (parents trained to support teachers by making resources to facilitate learning in the Foundation Phase) • Learner development programmes (sport, wellness for life, career guidance)	• Youth employment initiatives, e.g. as computer technicians in schools • Creation of SMMEs that offer services to schools • Provide training workshops on relevant skills • Offer support and networks for entrepreneurs and apprentices	• Internet Café – school provides access to internet to support programmes like Teacher Resource Development and Food gardens • School has a visiting mobile health facility • School Well Being Centre provides sessions on topics relevant to local community • School used for market days, sport and community gatherings • School assists with job creation opportunities and skill development across the community	• Parents and community would be more inclined to support the school when it acts as a hub. • Meetings held by the school are linked to education but also aligned to the activities of the hub • The hub could be an extra revenue stream to finance extra education projects

Conclusion

Involving parents in schools implies that all stakeholders (schools, parents and communities) are willing to work hand in hand in order to change their mindsets so that all parties understand and accept the advantages of parental involvement. At any given time, but particularly during COVID-19 restrictions, it should be the responsibility of the school managers, SGBs and the teachers to initiate the participation and involvement of parents in school activities where it is possible. Due to the inherent barriers that exist in rural communities, schools will need to be guided and supported on how they can engage the parents in more meaningful, innovative and sustainable ways. This will require a programme where all stakeholders find ways to include and support the parents of every child in their school.

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